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AUTHOR Lynn, Leon
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ABSTRACT

This publication outlines different forms of parent involvement and provides specific examples of innovative practices. The first part summarizes what has already been learned about the difficulties of building parent involvement in schools. Some of the challenges stem from changes in the family structure, lack of family resources, opposition from educators, and larger and more compartmentalized high schools. Different types of parent-school cooperation, as identified by Epstein (1992), are highlighted in the second section. These are categorized as: (1) basic obligations of families; (2) basic obligations of schools; (3) involvement at school; (4) involvement in learning activities at home; (5) involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy; and (6) collaboration with community organizations. The third part outlines the following strategies used by middle schools and high schools to encourage parent involvement: developing parent empowerment, creating three-way partnerships, going to school instead of work, expanding the education of parents, and bridging the cultural gaps. (LMI)

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Brief to principals

ED 366 094

Building Parent Involvement

By *Leon Lynn*

In the summer of 1990, Daisy Cubias started walking the neighborhoods around Kosciuszko Middle School in Milwaukee, Wis., seeking out the families of children who would be entering the school as 6th-graders in the fall.

As the coordinator of a new program to encourage parent involvement at the school, Cubias wanted to visit as many families as possible before the academic year began, to start the process of making them feel welcome and to ease the often-difficult transition from elementary school to middle school.

The reactions she encountered told her how much work lay ahead. "A lot of times the students would say, 'Why are you here? I'm not even in the school yet. I haven't done anything wrong,'" she recalled recently. "Nobody from the schools had ever visited them before with good news."

During the past decade, educators have begun to attach new importance to getting parents involved in the education of their children. Studies have shown that students get better grades, have better attitudes toward school and have higher aspirations if parents are aware of what's happening in school and encourage their children.

Concern over dropout rates and low student performance, particularly among low-income and minority students, has driven more and more educators to reach out to parents with new vigor. But those educators often find themselves in predicaments similar to the one that Cubias encountered that summer in Milwaukee: Their new initiatives run smack into old attitudes, and other roadblocks, with deep and stubborn roots.

This brief outlines different forms of parent involvement and gives specific examples of innovative practices. We hope that school principals, and other educators, might use this information to clarify alternative paths to parent involvement, and to design specific programs to implement the chosen priorities in their schools.

Before we examine specific examples, however, we summarize some of what has already been learned about the difficulties of building parent involvement in schools.

The Scope of the Challenge

The social fabric of our nation continues to undergo profound changes. Today only 7 percent of students come from the type of family that might have been considered typical a generation ago: two parents in the home and only one a wage-earner. Today nearly half the children under 18 live in a single-parent home.

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Different Types of Parent-School Cooperation

Epstein (1992) has identified six important types of cooperation between families, schools and other community organizations. As schools make decisions about how to structure parent-involvement programs, it is useful to be aware of these different approaches. They represent different goals, require different strategies and involve different costs and benefits to the school.

1 **Basic Obligations of Families**–Families must develop strategies to provide for the health and safety of children, while maintaining a home environment that encourages learning and good behavior. Schools can provide training and information to help families understand their children and the changes they undergo through various stages of development.

The challenge is to deliver this information to all parents who want it, not just the few who can attend meetings or workshops at the school. Schools might have more success getting the message across through local cable TV broadcasts, audio and video tapes, newsletters and other handouts, for example.

2 **Basic Obligations of Schools**–Schools must reach out to families with information about school programs and student progress. This includes the traditional avenues of communication, such as phone calls, report cards and parent conferences. It also can include "innovative communications" that give family members additional information on school choice, choosing special curricula, courses, or activities, and making the transition from elementary-level education to middle school and high school.

Communication on these issues must be in a form that families find understandable and useful, and it must be two-way, with educators paying a great deal of attention to the concerns and needs of families.

3 **Involvement at School**–Parents can make significant contributions to the environment and functions of a school by taking part in school-based activities. This can include volunteering time on campus for school-sponsored activities, as well as attending plays, sporting events and similar functions. Schools can get the most out of this process by creating flexible schedules, so more parents can participate, and by working to match the talents and interests of parents to the needs of students, teachers and administrators. At the middle school and high school levels, the students themselves also can be encouraged to volunteer.

4 **Involvement in Learning Activities at Home**–With the guidance and support of teachers, family members can supervise and assist their children at home with homework assignments, as well as other activities that are coordinated with classroom work. Schools must retain the responsibility for setting the curriculum and providing instruction, while assiting parents by providing information on what requirements students must meet plus guidance on how to monitor children's progress and help them along.

5 **Involvement in Decision Making, Governance and Advocacy**–Schools can provide family members, as well as other community figures, with guidance and training in leadership and decision-making skills. At the same time, the schools can invite family members into the decision-making process of the school as true contributors, not tokens, and can provide information to families and community groups so they can effectively address school issues.

In order to ensure meaningful input, schools must work to open this process up to all segments of the community, not just those people who have the most time and energy to spend on school affairs.

6 **Collaboration with Community Organizations**–Schools can help families gain access to support services offered by other agencies, such as health care, cultural events and after-school child care programs. This helps families provide a home environment that supports learning. Schools make this happen by working with agencies, businesses, cultural organizations and other community groups. These partnerships also can help enrich school curricula and other student experiences.

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Schneider and Coleman (1993) report that a family's ability to get involved in the education of its children is most greatly affected by the presence or absence of family resources, especially income and the number of parents in the household. Thus, while parent involvement has steadily won new support among educators during the past 10 years, parents have gotten harder to reach. A parent who works a night shift, can't afford to miss a day's pay and has no power to rearrange his or her schedule, for example, will obviously have a much harder time attending school meetings scheduled at night.

On average, resource-based obstacles have an even stronger impact on African-American and Hispanic families, which are far more likely to be poor than white or Asian families. But that doesn't mean Hispanic and African-American families are less interested in getting involved. Numerous studies have shown that these families often want to play a greater role in educating their children, but lack either the resources or the experience to do so effectively.

Kerbow and Bernhardt (in Schneider and Coleman, 1993) cite data from the 1988 National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88), which show that African-American and Hispanic parents display significantly higher levels of school involvement than white or Asian parents with similar levels of income and education. The authors suggest that African-American and Hispanic families place a greater emphasis on education as a way to get ahead. "To claim that these parents are inadequate in their attention to their children's education," they write, "is straightforwardly mistaken."

But tapping that willingness to get involved is daunting for many

While parent involvement has steadily won new support among educators during the past 10 years, parents have gotten harder to reach.

educators. This is especially true at the middle school and high school levels. As students grow older, they face much more complex social pressures and begin asserting their independence from their parents. Many actually discourage their parents from coming to school.

Secondary schools also tend to be larger and more compartmentalized, so that no single person is primarily responsible for a particular student. This can leave parents unsure who to contact. Larger attendance areas at the secondary level can also add to transportation problems that keep some parents away. As a result of these and other factors, studies show that parent involvement drops off sharply once students reach middle school, and by the time they reach high school it can be difficult to see at all.

Advocates of parent involvement also must frequently contend with opposition from the educators themselves. Teachers and administrators, often without any formal training or positive experiences in dealing with parents, can view increased parental involvement as a threat to their professional autonomy and judgment. For example, at one Midwestern middle school visited by researchers from the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, the principal admitted discouraging parent "interference" in school governance, because it was feared that the traditional expectations of parents would clash with the principal's vision of progressive reforms within the school.

Some schools do, of course, give parents real power to influence the governance process–if, in some cases, prompted only by vigorous legislative action. A prime example is the Chicago public-school system, where in 1988 the Legislature created elected councils at each school. Parents hold a majority on each council, which appoints the principal, develops and approves the school budget and oversees the development of school-improvement plans.

Researchers report that the shift in power has resulted in a turnover rate among Chicago principals approaching 50 percent. But they also see positive attitudes among most teachers, and some of the system's lowest-performing schools have begun to post significantly better reading achievement scores on standardized tests.

In places where the law is less demanding, however, parent groups frequently are paid only lip service by school officials. Parents, seeing that such organizations won't be very fruitful, decline to take part.

Where schools do make an effort to include parents in governance, equal access to the process can be difficult to ensure. For example, at another middle school visited by researchers from the Center, this time on the West Coast, staff members complained that a small group of white parents dominated the school's parent association. Staff members feared that the association didn't really address the concerns of students who weren't white and reasonably affluent.

Ensuring equal access to all interested parents, not just those who already have the resources and experience they need to "work the system," becomes increasingly important as the number of students from poorer and single-parent families continues to rise.

Innovative Programs

Here are some ways that schools around the country have tried to encourage parent involvement. We focus here on strategies for middle schools and high schools because of the greater difficulty in encouraging parent involvement at those grade levels. Other examples can be found in Rioux and Berla (1993) and Fruchter, Galletta, and White (1992).

African-American and Hispanic parents display significantly higher levels of school involvement than white or Asian parents with similar levels of income and education.

✓ Empowerment of Parents
Milwaukee's Kosciuszko Middle School serves about 740 students, most of them Hispanic and economically disadvantaged.

In addition to conducting the home visits to families of incoming students mentioned earlier, Daisy Cubias established a "parent center" at the school, a room where parents can meet, make phone calls and get information to help solve problems. In an average week, between 5 and 15 parents stop by looking for help. The center is staffed by Cubias and a network of volunteers she has recruited, as well as three parents who are paid $6 an hour for 16 hours of work per week.

The center is also headquarters for the school's volunteer program. During the 1992-93 school year, volunteers contributed more than 1,400 hours of work to the school, serving as file clerks, tutors, in-class helpers and in many other capacities. In an average week, 10 to 15 parents come to school to volunteer.

The school also hosts adult education classes in English as a second language, computer skills and other useful subjects. Attendance ranges from 7 to 15 parents per weekly class. Cubias tries to organize at least two or three classes per year.

A special program for some students who need extra help with schoolwork calls on parents to agree, in writing, to attend school meetings and events. During the fall semester of 1992, 138 students took part in the program, and 53 raised their grade-point averages by at least half a point.

The impact of the empowerment program on the 700 or so parents at Kosciuszko may not appear very great. Cubias freely admits that the program "can't reach 100 percent of the parents, you can't reach 50 percent."

But in language echoed by her counterparts at many schools, she nonetheless credits the program with making real changes in the lives of many students and their families. Several parents have used skills they learned at the school to win better jobs, for example.

✓ Three-Way Partnership
Two middle schools in Baltimore, Md., began a program in 1990 that requires students to work with their parents in order to complete homework assignments. The Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork program, or TIPS, was designed by Joyce L. Epstein, co-director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Johns Hopkins University.

The two schools, Calverton Middle School and West Baltimore Middle School, together serve more than 3,100 students, most of them African Americans from low-income families.

The program tries to create a three-way partnership between parents, teachers and students. Teachers receive training in how to construct assignments that call on students to interview their parents, solicit their opinions on specific topics, play a game with them or work with them in some other way. The teachers also receive guidance on how to conduct follow-up exercises in class that let students share what they've learned.

Parents are sent letters about TIPS during the summer, are asked to attend orientation meetings, and receive additional information through newsletters and their children.

This year, researchers are beginning a formal evaluation of the TIPS program's effectiveness, said Vivian Jackson, the project's field director. But informal evaluations have shown very positive responses toward the program from parents, students and teachers. Many parents say they've taken a new interest in their children's homework, and students report that they've learned things about their parents they never would have known if they hadn't worked with them on TIPS assignments. Teachers report higher rates of return for TIPS homework than regular assignments, and they say the assignments have helped to open avenues of communication with many parents.

✓ Going to School Instead of Work
Manual High School in Denver, Colo., serves about 970 students. About half are white and one-third are African American. Twenty percent of the students are from low-income families.

Each August since 1987, parents of incoming 9th graders are sent letters by school officials, telling them they will be "required" to participate in an orientation meeting before school begins and at least one parenting workshop during the school year. Students whose parents comply receive extra academic credit toward graduation.

Manual also "requires" a unique third commitment: Each parent is

asked to come to school for a full day during the year. Working through the parents, school officials ask employers to grant each parent a paid day off to attend classes and meet with teachers. Almost all of the employers have agreed.

About 25 percent of the 9th-grade parents take part in at least some of the "required" activities each year. Last year only three parents spent the day at school, though school officials are hopeful they can boost that program's popularity. The school hasn't conducted a statistical study to gauge the program's effects, but parents have reported feeling more comfortable about communicating with the school, and staff members credit the program for nurturing a greater level of cooperation and commitment from parents.

✓ Expanding the Education of Parents

At Paul Robeson High School in Chicago, a parent-involvement program underway since 1989 seeks to recognize parents as individuals, with needs and interests that exist separately from their roles as parents. The school, which serves about 1,400 students–most from low-income families and virtually all African American–puts a heavy emphasis on parent education.

Last year Robeson hosted weekly classes in computer training and stress reduction, each of which drew about a dozen parents. The group that received computer instruction then began writing and printing a school newsletter. Another class taught parents how to write proposals for grants, and the school received several awards as a result of their efforts.

This year Robeson has enrolled about a dozen parents in an ambitious program called Strategy To Empower Parents and Students, or STEPS. In classes that meet two hours per day, five days per week for three months, parents receive training on how to obtain access to services offered by social service agencies and other community resources. The parents can then serve as "facilitators" who help their neighbors, and other Robeson parents, get the most from these services, said Robeson principal Jackie Simmons. The training also includes instruction in word processing, database management and other marketable skills.

✓ Bridging the Cultural Gaps

Two schools in California's San Diego County have taken steps to improve communications with families that don't speak English as their first language. At Muirlands Middle School in La Jolla, about 310 Hispanic students are bused from San Diego as part of a desegregation plan. The school, which has a total student population of about 870, has begun translating its parent newsletter into Spanish. Random telephone surveys of families found strong positive feelings about the newsletters.

Muirlands also has selected "community leaders" from its minority communities. They attend leadership training classes, serve as mentors for other parents and call lists of parents each month to keep them informed of school events and solicit input.

Montgomery Junior High School in San Diego provides translation in up to five languages at parent-teacher association meetings and other key events, in order to reach parents from Mexico, the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and other nations. Key documents, such as surveys on school climate and accountability, are translated as well.

FOR FURTHER READING:

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Director: Fred M. Newmann
Associate Director: Gary Wehlage
Dissemination Coordinator: Leon Lynn
Administrative Assistant: Diane Randall
Graphic Designer: Rhonda Dix

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The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools will study how organizational features of schools can be changed to increase the intellectual and social competence of students. The five-year program of research focuses on restructuring in four areas: the experiences of students in school; the professional life of teachers; the governance, management and leadership of schools; and the coordination of community resources to better serve educationally disadvantaged students.

Through syntheses of previous research, analyses of existing data, and new empirical studies of education reform, the Center will focus on six critical issues for elementary, middle and high schools: How can schooling nurture authentic forms of student achievement? How can schooling enhance educational equity? How can decentralization and local empowerment be constructively developed? How can schools be transformed into communities of learning? How can change be approached through thoughtful dialogue and support rather than coercion and regulation? How can the focus on student outcomes be shaped to serve these five principles?

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School of Education
Wisconsin Center for Education Research
University of Wisconsin–Madison
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Madison, WI 53706

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